

By Mehmet Ali Yalcindag, Chairman of the Turkey-US Business Council (TAIK)

Last Wednesday, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius published a piece about allegations in former NSA John Bolton's book relating to President Trump and Turkey. Calling them "corrupt dealings" and "startling stories," Mr. Ignatius brought up my name several times, as well as the association I chair, seemingly to draw a connection between my relationship with President Trump and several unrelated issues between the US and Turkey. But the facts do not support what Mr. Ignatius implies in his piece. The suggestion that the Turkey-US Business Council (TAIK) and I receive favorable treatment from the President of the United States and carry influence over his decisions regarding Turkey is false. Mr. Ignatius' column is mired in unfounded innuendo.

It is true that President Trump and I have known each other since 2008, but there is nothing inappropriate about this. In fact, companies I own and manage do not engage in any commercial activities in the US. I met Mr. Trump twelve years ago when I worked on a licensing deal with his company to brand two Istanbul towers with the 'Trump' name. We worked together once and remained friendly afterward. He was not a candidate for office and the idea that he would become President was outside the mainstream. It is not unusual or untoward for elected officials to have pre-existing friendships and this relationship has not resulted in special access or influence with the President of the United States, as Mr. Ignatius implies. Any official communication between the President, his staff, his Cabinet, Congress and myself or TAIK occurs through proper and highly transparent channels. In fact, we are so transparent that many of our exchanges are reported in the media.

TAIK's mission is to advance trade and economic cooperation between our two countries. We are not state-sponsored, as Mr. Ignatius states, but are an entirely member-funded and independent organization of Turkey's largest and most prominent companies looking to further integrate our economy with America's. You may recognize some of our brands. Microsoft, Apple and Ford are all members. Even Godiva chocolates is owned by a TAIK member.

Despite disagreements in recent years, Turkey and the US are allies with stronger shared interests than most realize. Our bilateral trade relationship stands at around \$25 billion in volume per year - but that pales in comparison to the potential. Dozens of Turkish products and industries - such as textiles and machine parts - are underrepresented in America despite high quality and competitive prices. Similarly, American products in a variety of sectors - such as liquefied natural gas and agriculture - are not taking advantage of high demand in Turkish markets. As the US looks to decouple itself from China, TAIK feels this is an opportune moment to fulfil this unmet potential and make our two countries stronger economic partners.

This is who we are and what we advocate for - and we do so with transparency.

Mr. Ignatius's column also touched on the US court proceedings relating to the Turkish bank Halkbank. But he failed to make clear how TAIK or I fit into this issue, likely because we have nothing to do with it. Halkbank is not a member of TAIK and we are not involved in the legal proceedings in any way. That said, the case is a critical issue for the Turkish business community since Halkbank is one of our largest banks. Turkey has been managing currency and inflation challenges for the last few years and, like the rest of the world, is confronting the economic consequences of the coronavirus. Even before the pandemic, it stands to reason that President Erdogan would inform President Trump of the economic

disruption that action against Halkbank would cause. I suspect this type of discussion is not unusual and has occurred across many U.S. administrations with allies.

Plus, given the myriad disagreements between Turkey and the United States in recent years, perhaps the personal rapport between Presidents Erdogan and Trump – which many are quick to vilify – is at least partly responsible for preventing collapse of a bilateral relationship between two NATO allies.

Despite the head-scratching scrutiny we face for carrying out a straight-forward mission, TAIK and I remain committed to working toward our goal of increasing trade. We believe stronger ties between the US and Turkey benefit both countries and the world. Notwithstanding what Mr. Ignatius may believe, American support for this aim would not be a personal favor. It would be a sound strategy to improve our economies, create jobs, and provide better long-term stability through cooperation and partnership.

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